



➤ Of Counsel

[Florida Law]

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Christine Weingart (left), an associate at Dean Mead in Orlando, consults with small-business owner Leigh Elliott.

Spot Check

'Issue spotting' gives business owners affordable access to attorneys.

Five years ago, when Leigh Elliott was getting ready to launch a small business, she looked for an attorney to review her plans.

"I wanted to be legally sound," Elliott says. "I wanted to make sure that my legal entity was correct, but I was working on limited funds."

It was beyond her budget, she says, to hire an attorney to work for days drawing up contracts and creating the various legal documents she needed. But she says it seemed too risky to move her business forward without seeking any legal expertise at all.

Between those extremes, she found Christine Weingart, an associate at Dean Mead in Orlando. Weingart, who graduated from the University of Florida's law school in 2007, was willing to "issue-

spot" with Elliott, meaning she would set aside an hour to meet with her, discuss the business, review the paperwork and look for legal issues that had the potential to become problems.

Weingart sees the arrangement as an investment. The hope, she says, is that the small businesses she issue-spots for will eventually grow into large businesses that will need more legal work. Until then, the sessions earn Weingart an occasional billable hour she wouldn't have earned otherwise — and the clients don't have to commit to funding a big retainer.

"A lot of times, especially now due to the economy, people don't have the money to hire an attorney to do everything," Weingart says. "It's a way to assist entrepreneurs to the extent that they can afford it."

A tax and corporate law attorney, Weingart says issue-spotting clients typically need help picking the right legal entity for their business, whether it be a corporation, a limited liability company or any number of general or limited partnerships. All have different tax and

liability implications.

Issue-spotting clients also ask about legal contracts required to bring on early-stage investors. Many need help with other paperwork. Typically, they'll bring her copies of sample documents or contracts they've printed off the internet or gathered from previous businesses and ask her to look for mistakes and tell them how make it right.

"You're trying to put them on alert and prepping them for problems that might occur," Weingart says. "It's like preventive medicine."

In some cases, the work can be finished in an hour. Other cases will need multiple sessions. Sometimes, Weingart will tell clients that their legal issues are too complicated for issue-spotting.

In Elliott's case, the sessions have become more frequent as her business has gotten bigger. Her company, Team Elliott Education, brings educational and lifestyle programs to health care communities and facilities in Orlando, Kissimmee, Lake Mary, Oviedo and Clermont. Gross income is up from \$12,000 the first year to \$200,000 now. ■